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The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Christian Monasticism

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RELIGIONS OF THE BOOK

“Scriptural movement” was coined by the late historian of religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith, as a common denominator to various religious trends in the Near East from the first centuries of the Christian era to late antiquity—in essence, from the formation of the New Testament and the redaction of the Mishnah to that of the Qur’an.¹ The best literary expression of this concept is probably found in the first chapter of the Manichaen *Kephalaia*.² In this major theological text of early Manichaeism, Mani explains to his disciples that earlier prophets, Jesus, Zarathustra, Buddha, all erred in preaching their doctrine orally, leaving to their disciples the duty to write it down. Such carelessness on the part of these prophets explains how various mistakes crept into the Scriptures of their respective religious communities. In order to avoid the repetition of such an error, Mani, the last true prophet sent to humanity from the realm of light, made sure to commit his teachings to writing. In order to be

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1. W. C. Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

2. Text edited and translated in H. J. Polotsky, *Manichäische Handschriften der staatlichen Museen Berlins, Band I, Kephalaia* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1940). This text is quoted and discussed in G. G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice: mutations religieuses de l'antiquité tardive* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), ch. 2: “L’essor des religions du livre,” 63–101, esp. 74–77.

entrusted correctly to future generations, once and for all, prophecy could not remain oral and had to be written down precisely as it had been delivered, i.e., by the prophet himself. Indeed, Mani devoted special attention to books and writings; this attention also stands at the root of his reform of the Pahlavi alphabet. The text of the *Kephalaia* thus reflects as clearly as could be expected the major change in the attitude toward oral versus written texts which can be discerned in our period. More precisely, the point that seems to have become common knowledge in our period is the need for a religious movement to be established upon a book. This was not anymore true only for monotheistic or dualistic movements evolved from Judaism. In the fourth century, even such staunch defenders of the Hellenistic traditions as the neoplatonists felt the need to possess holy writings of their own (and adopted as such the *Timaeus* and the *Chaldean Oracles*).³ This “scriptural movement,” which had started, much earlier, with the redaction of the Pentateuch and was pursued with the canonization of the Hebrew Bible and of the New Testament, would reach its zenith with the revelation of the Qur’an. No wonder that, for all we know, it is in this last text that the concept of *ahl al-kitāb*, “people of the book,” an expression which usually refers to Jews, but sometimes also to Christians, or to both Jews and Christians, appears for the first time. In other terms, the qur’anic formula represents Muhammad as a comparative student of religion, as it were, who had proposed to see there the common denominator of most religious communities which he could observe around him. The idea of “religions of the book,” which was launched on its modern career by Max Muller in 1873 in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, thus can be said to have qur’anic roots.⁴

Using a different terminology, Jan Assmann has recently attempted to identify a major mutation in the history of religions, in what he calls the passage from *Kultreligion* to *Buchreligion*.⁵ Assmann, an Egyptologist and a comparative historian of ancient religions, seeks to understand a shift from archaic religions of the ancient Near East to the religion of Israel and those following its main tenets. With this concept of *Buchreligion*, Assmann refers mainly to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While he is

3. R. Lambertson, “The Neoplatonists and Their Books,” in M. Finkelberg and G. G. Stroumsa, eds., *Homer, the Bible and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 2 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 195–211.

4. See *La fin du sacrifice*, 71–73.

5. J. Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung, oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich, Vienna: Hanser, 2003), 145–51.

correct in highlighting the watershed introduced in the history of religions by the idea of a revealed book, his discussion here remains rather schematic: there is no reason to think that ritual is less central in book religions than in polytheistic systems; rather, it is of different nature and endowed with a different status. Moreover, one should note that the Scriptures play a central role in monotheistic rituals, a role too often played down in recent scholarship. To some extent, Assmann's *Buchreligionen* coincide with Smith's "scriptural movements." This expression, or rather what it refers to, does not seem to have attracted the attention it deserves. It is probably true that the series of religious movements which appeared, grew, and competed with one another in the Mediterranean and the Near East in late antiquity showed common characteristics; it is also true that one can legitimately speak of a real movement of emergence and developments of religions of the book. But in order to understand more precisely the main characteristics of this scriptural movement in late antique religious history, one ought to perceive it within the broader framework of cultural history and of the major changes in the very conception of the book which occurred in this period. In other words, one needs to study religious and cultural history *together*.

The idea of a "scriptural movement" refers, of course, to the realm of religion. To what extent can we really speak of the emergence and development of "religions of the book," of new roles of books in various trends of religious thought and praxis under the Roman Empire and in late antiquity? The existence of books considered to be holy, whether they are revealed or not, had long been in existence in different cultural contexts. Suffice here to mention the very different cases of Orphism, of Zoroastrianism, of the Vedic and Hindu tradition, or of the Buddhist scriptures. The very case of Israel seems to refute the idea of the late antique "scriptural movement." Actually, it is earlier, in the Hellenistic times, that the Jews had created an important literature, not only in Hebrew, but also in Aramaic and Greek. The documents found at Qumran point to a very significant number of books either produced or copied there. Actually, the rise of Judaism as a religion of the book seems to have stopped quite suddenly, more or less with the birth of Christianity. The most striking fact about rabbinic culture during the first centuries of the Christian era is, precisely, the almost total disappearance of books. This "retreat," as it were, from a written to an oral literature, in which oral texts, not committed to writing, are learned by rote, could almost be called an anachoresis from the world of written culture, and has yet to be satisfactorily explained. The competition between nascent Christianity and Judaism may have been directly relevant

to this passage. For the rabbis, orality seems to have provided a protection against the dangers of dissemination. Moreover, the very holiness of the Torah which stood in a category of its own might have inhibited them from producing other books—as if there could be only one single book in their religious tradition. According to some of the best contemporary talmudic scholars, at least, this seems to be one of the main reasons for the almost total disappearance of books from rabbinic culture.⁶ In any case, a highly complex oral literature, of very large dimensions, in both Hebrew and Aramaic, was composed throughout late antiquity, both in Palestine and in Babylonia. At the same time that one can follow the development of a “scriptural movement,” Jewish intertextual culture goes oral. In a sense, however, even this rather extraordinary transformation of Jewish attitudes to books highlights the significance of the “scriptural movement” against which it reacts.⁷ This anachoresis from written culture is particularly striking as it is concomitant to some dramatic developments in Christian attitudes to the writing of books and as it also happens in the very same places. To give only one example, Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams have recently shown how, in Caesarea Maritima, both Origen and Eusebius after him were able to transform the physical appearance of books.⁸ These same Christian intellectuals, one should remember, were having almost daily contacts with their Jewish counterparts. One wonders how such new attitudes to and uses of books would have impressed the rabbis who were dialoguing with Origen and Eusebius.

The holy Scriptures of the Jews, in their Greek garb, had been adopted, or reappropriated, by the Christians. Hence, Augustine would still be able to call the Jews both *librarii nostri* (our scribes),⁹ and *custodes librorum nostrorum* (keepers of our books).¹⁰ Thus, during the pogrom organized in 418 by the Christians on the Jewish community of Minorca, the arsonists took great care to save the sacred books of the Jews. Such precautions, of course, would not be taken with pagan books: in 402, for instance, the

6. See now the magisterial study of Ya'akov Sussmann, “‘Torah she-beal-Peh’ peshutah ke-mashma’ah: koḥo shel kotso shel yod,” in Y. Sussmann, D. Rosenthal, eds., *Mehqerei Talmud* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), 209–384.

7. See further *La fin du sacrifice*, 63–101.

8. See A. Grafton and M. Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

9. Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.*, 56.9 (PL 36:666).

10. Augustine, *Sermo* 5.5 (PL 38:57).

biblia peplērōmena goēteias (the “books full of magic”) found in the Gaza Marneion would be burnt together with the pagan temple.¹¹

When reflecting about books in ancient societies, we must remember the existence of that oxymoron, oral books, i.e., quite fixed texts which are preserved only orally, sometimes for very long periods of time, and never committed to writing. The clearest such example might be the Gathas of the Avesta, the oldest texts of the Zoroastrian tradition, which were transmitted orally, with great precision, for a whole millennium.¹² For at least a few decades, it seems that the Qur’an, too, remained oral, before it was committed to writing.

It is interesting to note that the text of the Mishnah (or *Deuterōsis* in Greek) was fixed at the turn of the third century. Approximately at the same time appears the idea of a list of texts included in a “New Testament” (*kainē diathekē*). I have proposed to explain this striking synchronicity, which does not seem to have been really noticed, as the outcome of an intense competition between the two sister religions throughout the second century, each striving to establish a set of hermeneutical rules for the proper interpretation of the Bible.¹³ The concept of “scriptural movement,” then, is endowed with different meanings. Side by side with the written text of revealed Scriptures, it also refers to the fact that for both Jews and Christians, more than for other religious traditions in antiquity, theology—reflexive thought about religious beliefs and practice, whether oral or written—belonged to the very core of religion. The power of this idea was such that eventually even late antique philosophers and intellectuals seeking to defend the Hellenistic religious tradition felt the need to develop a theology and holy scriptures of their own.

Throughout the centuries of the Roman Empire, first pagan, and then Christian, one can discern a series of major and complex transformations in the form and uses of books. The first transformation is directly linked to the material support of books, to their form. From the first to the fourth century, books, which until then had been written on scrolls, increasingly took the form of codices—although these codices, like the

11. See S. Bradbury, ed., trans., *Severus of Minorca, Letter on the Conversion of the Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

12. See S. Shaked, “Scripture and Exegesis in Zoroastrianism,” in M. Finkelberg and G. G. Stroumsa, eds., *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond*, 63–74.

13. G. G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 2d ed., Numen Book Series 70 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005), 79–91.

scrolls, are usually written on papyrus rather than on parchment.¹⁴ In this regard, Guglielmo Cavallo has been able to speak, with no exaggeration, of “the codex revolution.”¹⁵ The passage from roll to codex represents indeed the most dramatic transformation in the history of the book before Gutenberg.

Now this transformation was completed much faster among Christians than outside the community. Indeed, the Christians clearly seem to have played a pioneering role in using the codex. While the passage from roll to codex was slow and gradual, papyrologists have noted that almost all Christian papyri belonged to codices, while very few were written on rolls. At the end of the second century, the codex had become “a Christian innovation.” One has even spoken of a “Christian obsession with the codex.”¹⁶ For a *religio illicita* that was both outlawed and strongly missionary, the easy circulation of books of small dimensions was particularly significant. In a sense, early Christianity might be described as, rather than a religion of the book, a religion of the paperback. In fact, various testimonies reflect the deep interest in books on the side of Christians. They seem to write so much that William Harris, the author of an important study on ancient literacy, has been able to speak of the “acute logorrhea of Christian authors.”¹⁷

The reasons for the clear Christian preference for the codex have been sought in various directions. Some of the complex reasons for this fact seem to have been of a practical order. The codex was a new, modern, kind of book, cheaper to produce (as it could be written on both sides of the page) and easier to manipulate (as there was no need to unroll it). The codex, moreover, had a dramatic impact upon both attitudes to and roles of books—to start with the books of the Bible. The codex permitted one to read the Bible (in translation) and carry it around easily, to quote and move from text to text with relative freedom. The new form of the book entailed a new, lower, more popular status, and this new status brought new roles to books. Books, including the Scriptures, had become literally handy, more easily kept, carried, opened, and read.

14. See M. Hale Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 169.

15. G. Cavallo, “Between *volumen* and Codex: Reading in the Roman World,” in G. Cavallo and R. Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 64–89.

16. References in G. G. Stroumsa, “Early Christianity: A Religion of the Book?” in M. Finkelberg and G. G. Stroumsa, eds., *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond*, 153–73.

17. W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 305–6.

But it stands to reason that side by side with such practical reasons for the Christian preference to the codex, this preference must also have been of an inherent or religious nature and must have stemmed from the self-perception of Christianity. The codex did not possess the hieratic but frozen cultural character discernable in the roll. Christianity, indeed, perceived itself as a new religion, free from the inhibitions and cultural habits of past traditions. I have sought elsewhere to analyze the ambivalent attitudes of early Christian intellectuals to the idea of the book and to explain the rise of the Christian codex through the marginal position of the Christians in society, which permitted and encouraged disengagement from hallowed patterns and accepted new, more popular forms of cultural transmission.¹⁸ The multiple and powerful roles of the Bible in Christian missions and education, as well as in the creation of a Christian culture, have been duly noted by scholars.¹⁹ Yet, various aspects of these roles remain to be studied in depth, from the global approach of the new status and roles of books in religions of the book.

Another major transformation of the attitude to books took place in practices of reading books, alongside those changes in the methods of writing them.²⁰ Side by side with the passage from roll to codex, our period saw the development of silent reading, a development (rather than a discovery) for which Augustine offers our best testimony, in a famous passage of the *Confessions* (8.12). To be sure, the development of silent reading, which would take a very long time, as it is not before the thirteenth century that it is well established, did not entail the disappearance of reading aloud. In parallel, the public reading of Scriptures, aloud, had become a major aspect of Christian ritual. The kind of recitative reading (*Sprechgesang*) that the monks were commonly using for the biblical texts highlights their close relationship with these texts, which they often knew by heart. In both cases, to be sure, the Christians were following the Jews, who had for centuries developed such a dual, private and public, pattern of reading the Bible.

The Christian adoption of silent reading seems to be directly linked to the private reading of the Bible in monastic milieus (in particular of the

18. "Early Christianity: A Religion of the Book?"

19. The best treatment is H. Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

20. I borrow the term "reading system" from W. A. Johnson, "Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity," *American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000): 593–627. Johnson shows how in ancient society, "reading" is tightly bound up in the construction of the community and how it is sharply distinct from pragmatic reading (of documents, for instance).

Psalms, a corpus also central to public worship) in meditation and oration. The ability to read the holy text in silence and to memorize it brought about its internalization. In other words, this practice permits the conception of an interior book, written not on parchment, but in the heart of the believer. This metaphor of the “Book of the Heart,” indeed, had a long and rich development in the history of Christian spirituality.²¹ In other words, the origin of silent reading among early Christian elites reflected the transformed status of the individual in the new religious system, and it must have been as closely related to it as was the use of the codex.

THE MONASTIC MILIEU

More than in any other milieu, it is in the monastic movement that new roles of the book took shape and that a new culture of the book was born. Such a proposition might at first seem odd, almost paradoxical. For all we know, the first monks, either in Egypt or in Syria and Palestine, were far from being the obvious carriers of traditional literate culture. Peter Brown, among others, has highlighted the deep differences between the attitude to books and learning, reading and writing, among early Christian urban intellectuals, such as the Alexandrian Fathers, Clement and Origen, and that which developed among the early monks in the Egyptian deserts. Brown has insisted upon the fact that the new *cultura Dei* that the monks sought to create, which represented nothing less than an alternative cultural model, remained usually oral, and was expressed in vernacular (Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, etc.).²² It was quite alien to the traditional highbrow “system of reading” of the urban Christian elites. Referring to the *Life of Antony*, Peter Brown speaks of an alternative cultural model, often oral and on the margins of literacy, propounded by the monks.²³ There

21. See E. Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), which offers a history of the metaphor. On the origins of the idea, see D. M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablets of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

22. On the meaning of this new cultural model, in the footsteps of Marrou, see M. Vessey, “The Demise of the Ancient Writer,” *J ECS* 6 (1998): 398. On the status of books among early monks, see Ch. Kotsifou, “Books and Book Production in the Monastic Communities of Byzantine Egypt,” in W. E. Klingshirn and L. Safran, eds., *The Early Christian Book* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 48–67, and C. Rapp, “Holy Texts, Holy Men, and Holy Scribes: Aspects of Scriptural Holiness in Late Antiquity,” in *ibid.*, 194–222.

23. P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 229.

is no denying the major differences in cultural attitudes between monks and urban elites. Yet it would be misleading to conceive the new culture of the monasteries as radically different from a book culture. Despite the centrality of the oral relationship between spiritual master and disciple, the new monastic culture did not give up on the dimension of writing and reading, nor indeed that of *listening* to the book being read or recited.²⁴ It soon became identified as a culture of the book. More precisely, this was a culture based almost exclusively upon one book, or one set of books, the Bible, the revealed Scripture, as Douglas Burton-Christie has shown so well.²⁵ From being extensive, reading became intensive, as it were.²⁶ In this sense, one can argue for some similitude between the attitude of the monks and that of the Rabbis. Like in the Jewish *Beit hamidrash*, the Bible was not only read, copied, and recited in the monasteries. Some parts, at least, (in particular the Psalms) were learned by heart and used in prayer, others were deemed particularly fit for commentary and interpretation.

For the monks, then, the “religion of the book” often meant the community of religious virtuosi, centered around the holy Scriptures. While their new culture remained to a great extent oral, focusing upon the dialogical relationship between the monk and his spiritual master, the written word (in particular the Word of God) played a major role in it. Like the medieval monastic communities, although in a different way, the early monastic groups can also be called, to use an expression coined by Brian Stock for a different milieu and a later period, “textual communities.”²⁷ The monks, indeed, read, and their intellectual activity focused around this reading. As Stock has observed, the same cannot be said of philosophers.

24. On oral (and aural) aspects of Scriptures, see W. A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

25. D. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

26. Before Cavallo, Rolf Engelsing had shown how, at the start of the print culture, the reverse phenomenon could be observed: from intensive, reading became extensive. See in particular his *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland, 1500–1800* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974).

27. See B. Stock, “Textual Communities: Judaism, Christianity, and the Definitional Problem,” in his *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 157, who notes that the term was conceived to fill a gap in Troeltsch’s conception of the relationship between church and state. One should note that Stock’s concept of “textual communities,” which was first formed to describe a western medieval phenomenon, must be endowed with a different meaning when applied to late antique phenomena.

Neither Epictetus nor Marcus Aurelius tell us much about reading and writing.²⁸ Plotinus, for his part, whose teaching was oral, cannot be said to have related to the text of either Plato or Aristotle in the sense that the monks related to that of the Bible. The Christian monks, then, can truly be said to have developed a new system of reading, a system based upon the constant and central presence of a book whose contents were almost known by heart (to be sure, this is true only in theory; in practice, it is doubtful that the knowledge of many monks went much beyond the Psalms and the New Testament).

In the monastic communities, however, reading the Scriptures had a purpose entirely different from that ordinarily attributed to reading: the transmission of knowledge. The constant repetition of a text known by heart—and the Pachomian monks, for instance, were expected by their rule to know by heart at least the Psalms and the New Testament—was not meant to inculcate or assimilate any new knowledge. This activity, which would be known in Medieval monasticism as *lectio divina* (or *sacra pagina*), was soteriological in essence: it was meant as a technical method of concentration of the mind, a way of praying through the Scriptures, so that the Word of God may enter the mind or heart and expulse or repulse evil thoughts sent by Satan.²⁹ One may quote here Abba Hilarion, the father of the monastic movement in Palestine:

He also said: “The acquisition of Christian books is necessary for those who can use them. For the mere sight of these books renders us less inclined to sin, and incites us to believe more firmly in righteousness.”

He also said: “Reading the Scriptures is a great safeguard against sin.”

He also said: “It is a great treachery to salvation to know nothing of the divine law.”

He also said: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is a precipice and a deep abyss.”³⁰

A constant prayer, as demanded by Cassian, this peculiar form of silent reading of the Scriptures is meditative in essence (*meletē*, *meditatio*, *ruminatio*). The *lectio divina* developed in the early phases of Egyptian monasticism would play a major role throughout the Middle Ages, both in Byz-

28. B. Stock, “Reading and Self-Knowledge,” in his *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 125.

29. See for instance L. Leloir, “*Lectio Divina* and the Desert Fathers,” *Liturgy* 23 (1989): 3–38.

30. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. B. Ward, SLG (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1975), 49 (Epsilon).

antium and in the West, as well as in later forms of Christian spirituality, for instance in the *devotio moderna* or among the first Jesuits.³¹

It is, however, another aspect of the monks' textual community that I wish to emphasize here, namely, the fact that the monks did not only learn to read, but also to *write* in a new key. Cavallo has highlighted the intimate connections between reading and writing in the early monastic communities. He argues convincingly that it is mainly due to the emergence of silent (or almost silent) reading that we owe a new dignity of the activity of writing, mainly in the West (according to him, the traditional attitudes to scribal activity were retained much longer in Byzantium).³² For Cavallo, it was not the new separation of words on the page that permitted silent reading, but rather the opposite: it was the development of silent reading (and writing) that imposed new graphic modalities (as the sense of the text was not anymore expressed by vocal articulations).³³ I wish to pursue the path opened by Cavallo, in arguing that it is precisely their own marginality to traditional *paideia* that gave the monks the freedom necessary to create new forms not only of reading, but also of writing.

Athanasius's *Life of Antony* is truly one of the foundational texts of Christian spirituality, East and West. Its fame, which never abated, started early: a Latin translation was in circulation before the end of the fourth century. In chapter 55, a text which has not been given due attention, the author describes at some length Antony's message to the monks who were seeking his advice. They were asked to keep their faith in God, "to guard themselves from lewd thoughts and pleasures of the flesh, [. . .] to flee vanity, pray constantly, to sing holy songs before sleep and after, to take to heart the precepts in the Scriptures" The strong presence of Scripture in the monks' daily existence is clearly reflected in this sentence.

31. See for instance Dom Lucien Regnault, "Monachisme oriental et spiritualité ignatienne: l'influence de S. Dorothee sur les écrivains de la Compagnie de Jésus," *RAM* 73 (1957): 141–49.

32. G. Cavallo, "Lire, écrire et mémoriser les Saintes Ecritures," in Ch. Jacob, ed., *Des Alexandries II: Les métamorphoses du lecteur* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 2003), 87–101. See further Mark Vessey's rich analysis of the rise of the scribe in late antique Western Christianity: "From Cursus to Ductus: Figures of Writing in Western Late Antiquity (Augustine, Jerome, Cassiodorus, Bede)," in P. Cheney and F. A. de Armas, eds., *European Literary Careers: The Author from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 47–103.

33. Cavallo seeks to refute here the theory of P. Saenger, "The Separation of Words and the Order of Words: The Genesis of Medieval Reading," *Scrittura e civiltà* 14 (1990): 49–54.

Athanasius adds that that Antony used to say, referring to the Pauline verse: “Examine yourselves and test yourselves [*heautous anakrinete, heautous dokimazete*]” (2 Cor 13.5). “Now daily let each one recount to himself his actions of the day and night, and if he sinned, let him stop . . .” Antony explains what he means by this kind of self-examination, which is intended to bring to the light of consciousness some of our actions which had remained unconscious until then (*pollakis gar kai heautous, en bois Prattomen, lanthanomen*). One should note here that self-examination as a regular reflexive effort does not appear in the earliest strata of Christian literature. It becomes more common in the fourth and fifth centuries:³⁴

Let each one of us note and record (*sēmeiōmetha kai graphōmen*) our actions and the stirrings of our souls (*tas praxeis kai ta kinemata tēs psuchēs*) as though we were going to give an account to each other. And you can be sure that, being particularly ashamed lest they be known, we would stop sinning and even meditating on something evil . . . so also we will doubtless keep ourselves from impure thoughts, ashamed to have them known, if we record our thoughts as if reporting them to each other. Let writing replace the eyes of our fellow ascetics [*estō oun hēmin to gramma anti ophthalmōn tōn sunasketōn*], so that, blushing as much to write as to be seen, we might never be absorbed by evil things. Patterning ourselves in this way, we shall be able to enslave the body.³⁵

To what extent was Antony’s injunction to the monks to keep a diary followed? There seems to be no other evidence indicating that keeping a diary became immediately a widespread habit among monks. It is only some two centuries later that we hear, from John Climacus, that monks used to carry a small notebook attached to their belt, on which they used to write down their thoughts (*logismous*) on a daily basis.³⁶ Calling attention to the passage from the *Vita Antonii*, David Brakke notes that Athanasius articulates here “his own version of early Christianity’s ‘rhetoric of shame’: because the monk is a mirror, he must form himself so as to be

34. In monastic circles, it is most clearly represented in the Palestinian tradition of the fifth century, in particular Barsanuphius and John, as well as Dorotheus of Gaza, who exhorts the monk to examine himself every six hours. See J. C. Guy, “Examen de conscience [chez les Pères de l’Eglise],” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 4:1801–7.

35. I am using the edition of G. J. M. Bartelink, *Athanase d’Alexandrie, Vie d’Antoine*, SC 400 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994), 280–87. I quote according to the translation of R. C. Gregg, *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 72–73. Unfortunately, neither Bartelink nor Gregg offers any real commentary to this chapter.

36. *Scala Paradisi* 4 (PG 88:701 CD).

transparent to others without shame or embarrassment.”³⁷ It is something else, however, that this text seems to emphasize. The journal kept by the monk, in which he spells out his inner thoughts, or, more precisely, his evil thoughts (*logismoi*) or sins, is not meant to be shown to the other monks, but rather to externalize, as it were, these thoughts and these sins, so that they might become visible to individual himself. Through writing, then, thoughts and sins arise to the surface of consciousness, and the monk sees himself as others might see him, as if he were someone else. Writing is here a way of speaking to oneself, a kind of soliloquy—a concept and a literary form invented, at more or less the same time, by Augustine.³⁸ In other words, writing is here used as a kind of spiritual exercise, and has become a method permitting one to read or decipher one’s own soul. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the first Jesuits, who were to give a new life to the idea of spiritual exercises, were very fond of a figure such as Dorotheus of Gaza.

While the method propounded by Antony represents a highly interesting use of writing, one should note that writing as spiritual exercise was not an invention of early Christian monasticism, as it was already well-known to Stoic philosophers, a phenomenon well studied by Pierre Hadot. Following Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius used to write every day in order to inculcate to himself the principles according to which one should live. The original nature of Marcus Aurelius’s writing explains its repetitious character.³⁹ Now for the Stoics, this kind of writing, which was equivalent to talking to oneself, was needed in order to retain spiritual intensity (Hadot), not to reform oneself, certainly not to repent from one’s sins. What Antony demands of the monks is of course of quite a different nature.

What should be emphasized here, then, is how it is precisely through their cultural marginality that the monks were able to invent new forms of writing, new roles for books. Since Max Weber, who interpreted in a similar way the position of the prophets of Israel, we know that cultural marginality does not mean impermeability to outside influence, usually from major cultural centers. The letters of Antony show that Egyptian

37. D. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 260. Brakke notes that John Cassian would later develop this theme.

38. See B. Stock, “Reading and Self-Knowledge,” in his *After Augustine*, 8–23, esp. 11. One eagerly awaits the publication of Stock’s Sather Lectures and their discussion of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*.

39. P. Hadot, *Introduction aux ‘Pensées’ de Marc Aurèle* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992), 91–95.

monks were not quite isolated from intellectual trends in Alexandria.⁴⁰ But their marginality forced them to transform the cultural models they were receiving from outside. The monks, who had discovered a new, meditational mode of reading, also discovered a confessional mode of writing. The act of writing could now be used in order to decipher one's soul. The confessional mode of committing one's sins to paper, however, was not limited to Antony's milieu.⁴¹ Augustine, in particular, would give the confession, the introspection focusing upon sins and shortcomings of the individual, a nobility of its own, which would reverberate in European literature and thought throughout the centuries. It is intriguing to note that Antony and Augustine, two highly different characters, coming from cultural backgrounds far away from one another, discovered closely related literary models. This fact may indicate that cultural creativity, in both cases, stems from the very belief system to which Antony and Augustine pledge allegiance: Christianity, a religion of a new kind, established upon ancient Scriptures but encouraging new, personal ways of reading and writing. The *lectio spiritualis* which was being developed in the monasteries transformed reading and writing into forms of contemplation. This amounted to a new "system of reading and writing." In the new art of *soliloquium*, there was a *unio personalis* of writer, reader, and audience. Augustine's *Confessions*, which inaugurated the age of the self-conscious reader and thinker in Western literature, proposed a new attitude to the *bios*, the aim of revealing sin.

The concept of an interior book, written in the soul, and remaining sealed (or rather, rolled), inaccessible except to God and the rational creatures (i.e., the angels), was already known to Origen. For him, this interior book contains the "written records of our actions and thoughts." The contents of these books or tablets remains secret, as they are now rolled up and covered in our heart, and will only be opened at the time of judgment, in front of the divine throne. Origen says that "they are etched in a certain furrow of the conscience" (*et notis quibusdam conscientiae sulcati*), implying that this furrow is esoteric and must be deciphered in order for the text to be understood.⁴² Similarly, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* refer to a saying of the old men, according to which the thought of fornication (*ho logismos tēs porneias*) is a book (*biblion*) of sorts, written in us, and

40. See S. Rubenson, *The Letters of Saint Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

41. It is interesting to note that in the Greek Orthodox Church, to this day, one is expected to write down his or her sins before confession.

42. Origen, *Comm. ad Rom.* 9.6 (PG 14:1242B-C).

which we must extirpate.⁴³ It seems, then, that for Antony (or at least for Athanasius's Antony), keeping a diary permits the translation of our sinful thoughts from the domain of the unconscious to consciousness and their eventual extirpation from our soul.

In the light of such texts, we might understand better Antony's injunction to the monks: by keeping a diary, they are able to open the otherwise hidden and closed book of the heart, they can decipher its alphabet, and spell out what is written in it. In a way, they become like angels, those rational creatures mentioned by Origen, who will be able to read the book of our heart (*ab omni, ut diximus, creatura rationabili relegentur*). Through writing, the monk, then, becomes equal to the angels. Together with constant prayer, the recitation of the revealed Scripture, writing is also an aspect of the *bios angelikos* which the monks are supposed to lead.

It is also in this context, I suggest, that one can understand a few cryptic references to the secret writing in use among Pachomian monks. Indeed, Jerome testifies in the Preface to his translation of the Pachomian rules that a secret language, and a special alphabet, had been revealed to Pachomius and his acolytes by an angel. This language may be understood as the secret language in which the book in the heart is written, and which will be opened only at judgment day.⁴⁴ Both reading (or reciting from memory) in the revealed book of God and writing one's diary, i.e., deciphering the hidden book in one's heart, became in early monastic circles major aspects of the daily attempt to know oneself. The permanent attention to oneself and care of oneself was a spiritual exercise different from that practiced by the Stoics because it was meant not to strengthen the self but to transform it through repentance.

43. *Apophtegmes des Pères: Collection systématique, chapitres I–IX*, J.-C. Guy, S.J., ed. and trans., SC 387 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993), 5.38, p. 278–79.

44. *Aiunt Thebaei quod Pachomio, Cornelio et Syro, qui usque hodie centum et decem annos vivere dicitur, angelus linguae mysticae scientiam dederit et loqueretur per alphabetum specialem signis quibusdam et symbolis absconditos sensus involvens*. See C. Joest, "Die Geheimschrift Pachoms—Versuch einer Entschlüsselung. Mit Übersetzung und Deutung der Pachom-Briefe 9a und 9b," *Ostkirchliche Studien* 45 (1996): 268–89. Further research might be able to find some similarities between monastic and Jewish esoteric conceptions in late antiquity. See the introduction to the second edition of G. G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*. On aspects of esoteric language in early monasticism, see now B. Bitton-Ashkelony, "Counseling through Enigmas: Monastic Leadership and Linguistic Techniques in Sixth-Century Gaza," in S. La Porta and D. Shulman, eds., *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign* (Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture, 6; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), 177–99.

A consequence of the dramatic transformations of both writing techniques and reading fashions led to a major change of attitudes toward the writing of books, something considered until then a subaltern activity, a task belonging to the scribe. In the Latin West, from Jerome to Cassiodorus, copying books would become a non-profit and worthy activity. The progressive replacement of the roll by the codex permitted the creation of the book as an artifact. No Greek or Roman god had ever been represented with a book in his hands, while this would become common for both Christ and his apostles in late antique Christian iconography. In a sense, one can say that the book was endowed, in late antiquity, with a new religious status and dignity. Some of the most powerful aspects of this new dignity have been recently studied by Derek Krueger, who shows how writing became, in early Byzantine hagiography (a literature stemming from monastic milieus), a religious praxis of sorts. Telling the story also meant participation in the cult, and writing became in itself a spiritual exercise.⁴⁵ The implicit and explicit assumptions regarding the meaning and significance of writing, reading, and narrating remain in need of further elaboration. What is already clear, however, is the fact that writing became, among the Christian monks of late antiquity, a central activity of religious life, an enterprise both theological and ritual in nature.

It has certainly not been my intention here to claim that the monastic movement was the only carrier of the late antique transformation of reading and writing. Such a transformation, which was mainly, by nature, an urban phenomenon, goes much beyond the limits of ascetic communities, and even of Christian education. What I have tried to highlight is some of the rather special paths taken by this phenomenon in monastic milieus. The crucial role of Christian monks and monasteries, both in the East and in the West, in the transmission of ancient texts and, more generally, classical literary culture, from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, is in need of no further argumentation. The fact that this role in the transmission of knowledge was successfully undertaken by members of a radical movement who rejected traditional forms of education, who often were barely literate themselves, and who had a rather ambivalent attitude toward books represents a paradox which has not yet been explained quite satisfactorily.⁴⁶ The preceding remarks on the “scriptural movement” of late

45. D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

46. On this, see in particular M. Williams, *The Monk and the Book*, 176–200.

antiquity also sought to shed some new light on this puzzling phenomenon. It is the new forms of reading and writing developed by the monks, and their focus upon the Bible, that were eventually applied to a much larger literary corpus: the inheritance of the classical world. The new role of books and the transmission of knowledge would be discovered thanks to methods developed in order to reflect on the single book that mattered to the monks: the Bible.

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